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ABSTRACT

Before introducing innovations in the classroom as an alternative to memorization, teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) need to consider students' existing preferences as part of a general appreciation for students' culture. In terms of perceived worth to students, memorization is tangible and requires practice that may eventually provide students with feelings of accomplishment. Memorization may also provide esthetic pleasure for some students. Perhaps ESL teachers could capitalize on this side effect of memorization in their literature classes. The Grammar Translation Method and the Audiolingual Method may demonstrate the limitations of memorization as a strategy for learning a second language. However, when students are expected to learn about cultures associated with their second language, memorization of certain information to be recalled frequently may be an acceptable tool. Teachers should not limit their methods and materials solely to those reflective of their own culturally bound attitudes, but rather, respond to students' desire to memorize with understanding. (JP)

Reexamining Memorization

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In a paper aimed at the "rediscovery" of rote, Wagner (1983, p. 180) discusses the connection between memorization and "traditional pedagogy," citing as examples Jewish, Christian, and Islamic schools, school systems in the United States before the twentieth century, and school systems in many countries today. This is not news for ESOL teachers sold on modern methodologies, who wrestle daily with students from many countries on the issue of using memorization in class. Such teachers often express exasperation with their students who come from traditional educational systems heavily oriented towards memorization. These students are likely to be expert memorizers (Liu, 1986; Tinkham, 1989)--certainly they do not seem to need instruction in memory strategies or mnemonic devices--who rely on the strategy far more than instructors consider desirable, and it seems to be difficult to wean them away from it.

Perhaps it is time for ESOL teachers to reconsider. Recently there has been a language teaching trend towards systematically studying attempts to introduce innovations in the classroom and developing techniques to facilitate the introduction of innovations (Henrichsen, 1989; White, 1989; Markee and Bailey, 1990; Osburne, 1992). One prerequisite to introducing innovation surely ought to be some understanding and consideration of students' existing preferences and their value as part of a general respect and appreciation of their culture. In order to promote teachers' understanding, this paper will reexamine the traditional practice of memorization to determine its perceived

worth and use to students in today's communicatively-oriented classes.

Success and Accomplishment

As suggested by much writing on second language acquisition, success in the second language classroom may in part be a function of factors beyond the student's conscious control, such as his or her learning style or aptitude for various aspects of communicating in a second language (writing ability, for instance; see Leung [1984] for a discussion of the relationship between native and second language writing ability). Memorization is something which students may prize because it is, in contrast, within their control. In an investigation of the value of memorization as a learning strategy for Chinese EFL students, Huang and van Naerssen (1987, p. 292) could not find "any significant effects of memorization on oral language achievement" but felt nonetheless that its effectiveness for some students could not be completely ruled out, since most students used it as a strategy and regarded it as "important." The "importance" possibly lies in the fact that it is something which students can control in terms of the relationship of effort to output. As Sivell (1980, p. 52) notes, students may use memorization for "imposing some kind of order on their efforts to review and master their work."

Two supplementary factors may account for the feeling of success which memorization provides to students. First, to students, the result of an act of memorization is something tangible, an acquired bit of L2 to hold on to, while the improvement in skills which may result from a session of

conversation practice is intangible. Second, we recognize that people usually experience feelings of accomplishment in performing in areas where they are highly skilled. Liu (1986, p. 89) cites numerous studies illustrating the superior memory performance of Chinese college students and nonstudents, relating it to the amount of practice required by the Chinese educational system; Chinese students are often regarded by ESOL teachers who have taught in China as enthusiastic and dedicated memorizers. In another example, Ericsson and Chase (1982, p. 613), in a study of exceptional memory, inferred that the success of two famous memory experts studied in the literature may have been partly due to their traditional, rote-based Latvian education. That is, traditional educational systems hone memory skills, so that eventually memorization provides students with "a sense of progress and confidence, crucial to morale" (Sivell, p. 52).

Esthetic Pleasure

The act of memorization itself may provide esthetic pleasure for some students, as noted by Effros (1989) when reminiscing about his own early experience and that of other professional mathematicians. In calling for more rote learning of mathematics in American schools, he reports "fond" memories of rote activities from his own elementary education. The esthetic pleasure involved in memorization is, however, most obvious with respect to poems and songs; it probably relates most closely to what Gill (1983, pp. 51-54) calls the "memorability" of certain lines, a characteristic to which memorization is the appropriate response, and to the satisfaction of the "intellectual possession" of material which memorization brings. In practical

terms, perhaps ESOL teachers could capitalize on this side effect of memorization in their literature classes. Encouraging students who wish to select notable passages for memorization would be a means of satisfying their desire to engage in this strategy.

Security and Familiarity

Sun and Sun (1989, p. 25) use this factor in urging western English teachers in China to blend modern communicative approaches with traditional methods more familiar to students. Although teachers are in general receptive to the idea of accommodating students' affective needs, many would probably be cautious about allowing this consideration to dictate basic choice of a methodology that they regard as pedagogically unsound: hence the daily struggle.

Perhaps teachers would be more willing to see compromise on such matters as acceptable if they considered that without being willing to begin where the students are, chances of getting them to accept a preferred methodology are slim; western teachers in particular who are hostile to memorization might also recall that similar situations are by no means absent from western educational systems. For example, Franz (1984, p. 2), in discussing the teaching of Spanish to English speakers in the United States, complains about students' excessive dependence on the textbook and other written materials to the detriment of oral practice. He blames this on the fact that they are literate members of a culture in which literacy, written text, and other visual input (e.g. from a computer screen) are excessively valued over oral language, and concludes that although teachers may feel

guilt over allowing more open book work than they might ordinarily regard as right, "teaching Spanish while restricting classroom use of the textbook or ignoring application of the computer is a losing proposition" (p. 23). Removed from familiar visual stimuli, students feel "disorientation and insecurity" and simply do not perform as well (p. 2). Here is a situation in which some accommodation to the affective needs of some students is regularly carried out to allow them to learn comfortably. When other students are dependent on memorization, the same argument must apply.

Body of Knowledge

It is interesting that although modern language-teaching methodologies generally denigrate memorization, in non-language fields its value is still clearly recognized as a means of providing students with a body of material which is instantly available for application or to serve as a foundation for understanding (Jackson & Anderson, 1988, p. 49). As Fong (1987, pp. 32-33) notes:

> Disciplines are founded on grammars, bodies of definitions, rules and principles that form the conceptual bedrock of a subject....Each academic discipline with its characteristic vocabulary, methods, and body of learning, represents a community of knowledge. Students joining that community need to be oriented to the current topics of conversation.

In scientific fields such as mathematics (Sharma, 1985, p. 3) and engineering (Kiewra, 1987, p. 290), for example, memorization is recognized as essential for entrance into

academic disciplines, and teachers fault students' failure to memorize enough basic information so that they can grasp new concepts and perform calculations or analyses without distracting and inconvenient recourse to reference materials. A certain amount of memorization, to be facilitated by the teaching to students of mnemonic devices and memory strategies, is praised: Roy G. Biv never does forget the colors of the spectrum (Jackson & Anderson, 1988), and memory is said to play "a very important role in learning anything" (Sharma, 1985, p. 7, describing the apparently official view of the Center for Teaching/Learning of Mathematics). Contrary to popular belief, the idea of so-called "rote" learning, the "mere memorization" of current phraseology, is by no means dead in contemporary non-traditional cultures (Wagner, 1983, p. 188).

We may grant that the failures of the Grammar Translation Method with its reliance on memorization of grammatical rules and the Audiolingual Method with its memorization of model utterances taught us about the limitations of memorization as a strategy for learning a second language. But this does not mean that memorization has no role. The interest in recent years in mnemonic devices such as the keyword approach for vocabulary learning (see Cohen, 1987, for a review of this area) indicates one area of use--vocabulary is a content area of language study. To find other such content areas, we must ask what the academic content of ESOL is--culture, for example. We normally expect language students to learn about cultures associated with their L2, and in this area, memorization of certain information to be

frequently recalled for use may be an acceptable tool, and another way of satisfying students' desires.

Success and accomplishment, security and familiarity, esthetic pleasure, a body of knowledge--to paraphrase Sivell (1980, p. 52), how can it be wrong for students to want these things? In a given situation, however, memorization may or may not be an appropriate or the best means to achieve them. If it is, then the issue becomes how to handle the memorization task; to a large degree, this means how to assist students in making the material meaningful (Hayes & Hood, 1982, p. 319; see Ley, 1984, for some interesting techniques from what he calls memorization's "golden age"). But if it is not, then yes, teachers must try to divert students from its use. But as Tinkham (1989, p. 697) points out, teachers should not limit their methods and materials solely to those reflective of "their own culturally bound strengths and attitudes." On the contrary, teachers need to respond to students' desire to memorize with understanding and appreciation rather than condemnation.

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